

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



# Arbor Day and Tree Planting

Thanks to the luscious warmth of spring and the ongoing inspiration of Arbor Day, many homeowners and community groups have started to think about tree planting. But choosing just the right tree or trees can be somewhat daunting. Here are some general guidelines, with suggestions from experts around the county.

First, figure out exactly why you want to plant a tree, and what you hope the tree will do for you. After all, there are so many wonderful reasons to plant trees, and so many different species from which to choose.

Many people plant trees for color and beauty, which is not surprising in an area currently dominated by Japanese flowering cherries and dogwoods. However, you might want to consider planting for year-round interest. Instead of loading up your yard with only spring-blooming trees, think about species which flower in mid-summer or fall, or which provide interesting bark, like crepe myrtles, or colorful foliage, like bronze beech or scarlet chokecherry.

For unique color and shape, Bill Rush, the horticultural supervisor for Montgomery County's Pope Farm Nursery, recommends the Alaska cedar, a pyramid-shaped specimen

with pendulous branches sporting blue-green foliage. Also known as the Nooka Cypress, the tree will eventually grow to between 30 and 45 feet, spreading 15 feet or more, and clearly becoming the show-stopper in a front yard. For a full year of color, Bill suggests the Cornelian cherry, a smaller, multi-stemmed tree with attractive peeling bark, tiny clusters of long-lasting yellow flowers which appear in March, followed by bright red, edible fruits in the summer, and orange-reddish leaves in autumn. The fruits are edible, but very acidic, and best left for the birds.

For brilliant color in smaller spaces, he recommends the 'Diane,' 'Aphrodite,' and 'Minerva' cultivars of Rose-of-Sharon. These are actually thickly-branched large shrubs, growing up to eight feet, with four to six inch-wide flowers in pink, white, and purple, appearing in mid-summer and lasting well into early fall.

Shade is another major goal of tree planting. When summer comes, there is nothing quite so welcome as sitting under the refreshing shade of a mature tree. And when properly placed in the yard, that shade tree can go a long way to reducing sum-



mer cooling costs. There are scores of trees common to our area which make perfect shade trees, and perhaps the best suggestion is to simply look around and see what is growing in parks and natural areas nearby. A quick inventory would probably reflect a mix of oaks and poplars, hickories and maples, beech, ash, and gum. However, before you start trying to load a container-grown sycamore into the back of your Porsche, make sure that your tree selection is appropriate to your site.

For example, some tree species, like red maples, will do well in both dry and moist soils, but that is not always the case. Before picking out a tree, talk to the staff horticulturist at a reputable nursery and discuss the type of soil and location you have in mind, or contact the Cooperative Extension Service at 301.590.9638.

Of course, some yards already have plenty of shade. In those cases, people often make the mistake of trying to squeeze yet another shade tree under an already dense canopy of mature trees. Do not let a bit of shade, even full shade, dissuade you from your Arbor Day duties. There are plenty of smaller trees and large shrubs ideally suited for your property. At present, the Eastern redbud is bursting into its purplish glory, and will soon be joined by the creamy white blooms of numerous *Viburnum* species, and the white flowers of shadbush and other *Amelanchier* species. For fall color, consider the intriguing yellow flow-

ers of witchhazel or the red berries and yellow autumn foliage of fragrant spicebush.

With a few exceptions, most of the tree species already cited are native to the Maryland piedmont and therefore dynamic parts of our overall ecosystem. In fact, one of the fastest growing motivations for tree planting is habitat restoration, the desire to help nature heal, at least in part. Selecting trees for our landscapes from this native palette ensures that they will thrive for decades to come. More importantly, planting these species helps to restore a small portion of the forest which once covered all of the Eastern United States.

Carole Bergmann, the Forest Ecologist for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, offers some of her favorite reforestation species for use in most upland planting areas: red maple, eastern red cedar, black gum, American hornbeam (which could also be used in a stream valley setting), red oak, white oak (the state tree), and tulip poplar. The poplar, incidentally, is a fast-growing tree, perfect for shade, although it is generally not a good idea to plant one next to a house, as branches can fall off during a storm.

For people planting trees in a stream valley location, Watershed Planner Craig Carson recommends American beech, green ash, river birch, and serviceberry, all of which are suited to the moister soils of the

floodplain, and which further help to stabilize erosive soils and stream banks.

On a more mercenary note, some people plant trees to increase property values. A well-treed lot can often sell for 20 to 40 percent more than a bare yard. Of course, if your home only has one tree and some foundation plantings, to make a real difference you will have to plant more than just one tree, although that is always a good start. In effect, any true reforestation effort will require selecting approximately eight to ten different native species, possibly including some evergreens, and mixing both smaller, understory trees, with larger-growing canopy trees. Your personal forest will not pop up overnight, but it will be a delight to watch it grow and mature over the years to come. And perhaps that is one of the best reasons to plant trees, after all.

For an excellent and extensive online guide to the native and naturalized trees of Maryland, visit the Trees of Maryland page of TreeGuide: The Natural History of Trees at [www.treeguide.com](http://www.treeguide.com).



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**Joe Keyser** is the author of the GreenMan column for the *Gazette Newspapers* in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles, columns, and reviews are available online at [greenman.askdep.com](http://greenman.askdep.com). Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

**Montgomery County  
Department of  
Environmental Protection**  
255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120  
Rockville, MD 20850  
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765  
email: [help@askdep.com](mailto:help@askdep.com)  
[www.askdep.com](http://www.askdep.com)

